

PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR THE PLAN

OVERVIEW

Isle Royale National Park is operating under a master plan that was written in 1963. Because the master plan is outdated, the park does not have a comprehensive plan to direct its decision-making processes. Current park planning efforts are fragmented into individual projects. A new plan is needed to provide an overall guide for the future use of resources and facilities, to clarify research and resource management needs and priorities, and to address changing levels of park visitation and use.

There are many issues or problems that the National Park Service is facing or may face in the future at Isle Royale National Park. The general management plan will provide a framework or strategy for addressing these issues within the context of the park's purpose, significance, and emphasis statements. The issues were identified and refined through discussions with park staff, park visitors, interested agencies and organizations, and the general public.

ISSUES

The natural resource program at Isle Royale is committed to developing a basic understanding of the park's resources and ecosystem and monitoring the health of those resources and processes. The gene pool of the fish, wildlife, and plants in the park must be preserved and protected. The park staff has been able to track some wildlife, such as moose, wolves, and beaver, but there is incomplete information on the status of small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, neo-tropical migrant birds, insects, and other resources. Information on air and water quality is also incomplete.

Inventory and monitoring of cultural resources are also needed. The majority of the known archeological sites are near campgrounds and

developed areas or along shorelines because surveys have been conducted in those areas on an as-needed basis. Little of the remainder of the island has been surveyed. The park has prepared cultural landscape information only for Rock Harbor Lighthouse and Edisen fishery. Other areas with culturally significant landscapes may exist. Information about current and historic use of the island by groups such as Native Americans is needed.

No strategies are in place for the long-term management of historic structures, including shipwrecks, in the park. Many of these resources are deteriorating. The current list of classified structures for the park is outdated; historic structures have become eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (national register) or have reverted to the park through the life lease process. It is anticipated that the park will assume responsibility for the structures at three U.S. Coast Guard light stations; long-term preservation goals are not in place.

One of the most noteworthy ongoing research projects in the park is the wolf/moose study. The classic predator/prey relationship can be studied at Isle Royale in a relatively closed environment with minimal influence from humans. During the last four decades, populations of both species have fluctuated dramatically. In recent years the moose population has fluctuated from a high of 2,400 animals to a low of about 500; wolf numbers have risen from a low of 12 animals to the mid-20s. The likelihood of island extinction of the wolves has lessened in recent years but remains a concern.

In order to accommodate property owners when the park was established, a life lease program was established at Isle Royale. Under this program the National Park Service purchased the properties, but allows owners to use them during their lifetimes. When the owners die, the property is turned over to the National Park Service. A systematic evaluation of these

structures is underway to determine their significance and national register eligibility. There is no clear policy for the disposition of structures, grounds, and docks on the island following the expiration of life leases.

The outstanding fishery is a significant resource that provides recreation for visitors to Isle Royale. Scientific information is incomplete and no long-term monitoring or management strategy exists to ensure the perpetuation of the fishery.

During the last decade, airborne pollutants have been identified in the park from as far away as agricultural fields on the Great Plains and waterborne pollutants from industrial areas around the Great Lakes. These pollutants are probably having an effect on vegetation and fish in the park and thus on the visitor experience. There is also the potential for short-term water pollution due to spills of toxic materials around Lake Superior and inside park boundaries. Regional or national strategies are needed to ensure that the quality of air and water at Isle Royale remains high.

Common visitor activities at Isle Royale include hiking, backpacking, motorboating, sailing, canoeing, kayaking, and fishing. While Isle Royale's visitation is low compared to other national parks, it ranks ninth in total number of backcountry user nights. When land area is considered, Isle Royale has the highest number of overnight stays in the backcountry per acre of any national park. Some visitors complain that their wilderness experiences are being compromised by visual intrusions and noise from park developments, jets and other aircraft, boats, and the behavior and activities of other visitors, such as having loud parties and playing stereos. Some visitors to the island have expectations for a certain kind of experience, and the actions of others may interfere with those expectations. The problem may not be evident to all, but park managers hear about visitors' disappointments in letters and through verbal complaints. With Isle Royale's density of backcountry use, differing preferences and

expectations are especially evident. The federal wilderness designation also carries with it certain expectations for visitors, such as solitude and quiet.

Increasing visitation is resulting in resource impacts and in crowding of some campgrounds, docks, and trails. While visitation is highest in July and August, some visitors' expectations for uncrowded experiences are not being met even during the spring and fall seasons. The number of backcountry permits issued has risen each year from 1985–1995. There was a slight drop in 1996, but the general upward trend is projected to continue. Some visitors complain that there are too few backcountry campsites on the island, and they are concerned about having to share campsites. Many campgrounds are filled beyond capacity in July and August. While most backcountry areas are in good condition, in some areas visitors are inadvertently damaging natural and archeological resources by widening trails, creating social trails and overflow campsites outside designated campgrounds, and trampling areas along trails and around campsites. Trails and campgrounds are especially susceptible to damage in the spring, when wet soils quickly turn muddy underfoot.

Because of advances in motorboat size, power, and navigation technology, many boaters who once would not have made the trip across Lake Superior to Isle Royale now are able to do so. For this reason, and perhaps because of changes in demographics and the popularity of motorboating, motorboat use at the park has increased over the past 20 years, and this trend is likely to continue. Many boaters believe that the park does not provide adequately for them (number and size of docks, fuel availability, pumpouts, campsites, mooring buoys).

For many years the waters around Isle Royale have supported a small-scale commercial fishing industry. Commercial fishing has gradually all but disappeared. It has been suggested that historic commercial fishing should be restored

for interpretation purposes and for the perpetuation of this traditional lifestyle.

Visitor information facilities are not effectively serving visitors. There is insufficient room in the Rock Harbor contact station to house a visitor contact desk, book sales, and exhibits. Interpretive media are inadequate — some exhibits are outdated or do not cover needed topics. Educational outreach (which would include general information about the park and park themes) to schools and other groups is limited.

Very few facilities on the island (docks, trails, shelters, lodge accommodations, visitor contact stations) are accessible to people with disabilities. As a result, opportunities for people with disabilities are limited; some potential visitors may be discouraged from visiting the island at all.

Many commercial services at Isle Royale are provided through incidental business permits (IBPs), which are based outside the park. These include guided backpacking, charter fishing, sea kayaking, scuba diving, and other activities. If the National Park Service issues an incidental business permit, all qualified commercial interests are entitled to receive one. There is no limit on the number that can be issued. Requests for permits have been steadily increasing over the past few years. There is concern from the public and the Park Service that there will be resource impacts and competition among commercial and private parties for facilities and space unless controls are initiated. A moratorium has been placed on new permits until better direction is established in the general management plan.

Difficult and potentially costly decisions must be made about the future of concessions services on Isle Royale. Opinions on the types and number of visitor services that should be offered differ greatly. Some feel that the lodge and restaurant are inappropriate in a wilderness setting, are too resource-consumptive, and too expensive. Others feel that these services are

traditional and should be offered for visitors with various needs and abilities.

Concession operations at Isle Royale have been heavily subsidized by the National Park Service for many years. Continuation of this subsidy has become increasingly problematic because of tighter government budgets and increasing requirements of safety and health regulations. Maintenance needs have been increasingly deferred (affecting docks, buildings, and utilities), staff has been reduced (for example, smaller trail crew, no wilderness rangers, and fewer maintenance specialists such as plumbers and electricians). Other park program needs have remained unfunded, such as basic resource inventories and monitoring, environmental education programs, and preservation programs for cultural resources.

With static budgets and declining staff, the Park Service cannot maintain the existing levels of facilities and services on Isle Royale. The island's docks, signs, buildings, campgrounds, and trails are deteriorating. Administrative and support facilities are also deteriorating and are not in compliance with health and safety standards. There are also backlogs in preventative and cyclic maintenance, specialized training, and equipment replacement.

The mainland headquarters facilities and parking in Houghton are too small to serve park operations and respond to visitor needs. Additional rental space is used to provide offices and work space in the winter. The main headquarters structure was built in 1939–40 by Works Project Administration work crews as a temporary office and workshop and has been remodeled extensively to house administrative offices. Office, work, and storage space is limited; working conditions are cramped. There are no meeting rooms or areas for breaks. The crowded and hectic atmosphere affects staff productivity and morale. Portions of the administrative part of the facility are not accessible to people with disabilities.